Politicians Prove Best At Running Wars

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article, written by Averill J. Berman, who teaches U.S. History at Los Angeles City College, explores the much-debated problem of who really should run wars: generals or politicians. Despite common opinion that generals are the specialists, Dr. Berman comes up with some surprising conclusions.)

"One of the frequent rallying cries of a certain segment of the population is the call to 'turn the war over to the military and let them win it.' A corollary of this doctrine is the scorn heaped upon civilians who permit 'political' considerations to hinder the victory-minded generals and admirals. In almost ritualistic fashion the dictum of the late Gen. Douglas Mac Arthur 'in war, there is no substitute for victory' is cited as irrefutable proof. But history does not substantiate these contentions.

"It was the great Prussian military expert Von Clausewitz in his early 19th century classic 'On War' who declared for all time that 'war is merely the extension of politics by more violent means.' To the old master it was painfully apparent that the strategic decisions, apart from the narrower tactical moves, were inseparable from their political context. And the best commander, according to his logic, was an intelligent civilian informed of the total structure of any given situation and possessing the character to confront the issues realistically."

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"THERE WAS indeed an echo of Von Clausewitz in the heartache of the late President Kennedy after the misadventure of the Bay of Pigs in April, 1961. 'I learned,' Mr. Kennedy remarked, 'that the judgment of a competent civilian aware of all aspects of the situation is often better than that of the best general.' He was referring to his own ability to gauge even better than the generals what was the principal political-military determinant for success in the operation--the sentiment of the Cuban people and their ability to join in any move for liberation."

Another president, Harry S. Truman, had been in a similar situation 11 years earlier. In October, 1950, U.S. forces had made what was to prove a fateful decision in crossing the 38th parallel leading to North Korea. The North Koreans had been routed after the battle of Inchon, a brilliant stroke by Gen. MacArthur which was to enhance his prestige and embolden him for more precipitous actions. At the time the President said the decision was a 'strategic' one and should be properly left to the military--a declaration he was later to rue."

"After a series of tragic events which led to the dismissal of the famous general, Mr. Truman remarked: 'He told me the Chinese wouldn't come into the war and I believed him.' The earlier decision was of course a momentary relinquishing of presidential responsibility for an assessment of Chinese intentions. The crucial point at issue rested with the President who is better prepared to make such evaluations than a man whose training and background are solely military."

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"AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN who turned out to be a magnificent commander-in-chief, with all the qualities that would have delighted Von Clausewitz, had his problems with his generals, dismissing one after the other. Professor T. Harry Williams in his 'Lincoln and His Generals' writes that not only was Lincoln the President at war but he also functioned as the general-in-chief, even to the point of positioning troops and issuing detailed instructions on such tactical and narrowly military matters as scouting and patrolling. In terms of the larger design of the war, he told the errant Fighting Joe Hooker: 'I'll explain it to you again carefully, General; it's not Richmond that is your proper objective but Lee's army.'"

"But it was the flamboyant Gen. George B. McLellan who caused Lincoln the most anguish. McLellan treated Lincoln with studied contempt and confided in his diary that he felt it a most malevolent dispensation of fate that a man as 'inferior' to him as Lincoln should have been vested with the supreme power. The President was willing to ignore the insults of his general if only to serve the Union cause. But Lincoln became convinced that McLellan 'had the slows' and sent him a message saying, 'If the general does not want to use the army, could I borrow it for a while?'"

"The battle of Antietam in September, 1862, proved to be the last straw. McLellan, in the President's view, should have won more than a partial victory. With foreknowledge of the enemy's plans and with sufficient forces to do the job, McLellan should have pressed his advantage and disposed of Lee's armies."

"And Lincoln perceived more than any of his generals that the emancipation of the slaves was the essential ingredient for the forging of the mighty sword that would lead to the ultimate restoration of the union. It was only when this momentous political decision was taken that the advantage swung decisively to the union. More than 186,000 Negroes served in the Union Army, an incalculable addition to their forces. And the subtraction of the labor base from the South made it more difficult for the Confederacy to find the essential manpower to carry on the struggle."

"'I did not control the events,' the great emancipator said with characteristic humility, but 'the events controlled me.' He made it clear that he was not averse to the direction in which he was being propelled."

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"THE DOCTRINE of military omnicompetence does not stand the test of World War I, Barbara Tuchman in "Guns of August" has drawn a melancholy picture of the sagacity of the generals on both sides. The specter of commanders ordering troops by the tens of thousands against fixed, strongly fortified positions without the slightest prospect of success was appalling. Nor could the military, especially on the German side, shift the blame to the civilians. After 1916, the German general staff under Hindenberg and Ludendorff was in control, unhindered by the slightest restriction from the virtually nonexistent civilian authority, and it did not fare well."

"On the allied side, after all the sorry contests for power and prestige of the generals, leadership improved markedly after the ascendancy of the civilian leaders David Lloyd George of Britain and Georges Clemenceau, 'The Tiger' of France. In March, 1918, Clemenceau consulted Marshal Petain on the steps to be taken to counter the last great drive of the German Army. The marshal recommended a static defense but Clemenceau overruled him and demanded an Allied offensive and the 'Tiger' proved to be right. It was he who remarked "war is too important to be left to the generals."

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"In an almost parallel situation as revealed by Marshal Zhukov in his memoirs, the most famous of the Soviet commanders complained bitterly about Stalin's interference in his military plans. Moscow was under siege in December, 1941, and Zhukov thought it would be disastrous to mount an attack. He recommended letting the Germans come to him. To do otherwise, he warned, was to run the risk of squandering his precious reserves."

"At that point, according to the marshal, Stalin tried persuasion and when that wouldn't work, ordered a counter-offensive. It was then that 100,000 Russian women poured out of the city and undertook the back-breaking labor of digging the trenches, setting up the barbed wire and mounting the artillery emplacements. The result is history."

"THE CONCEPT OF civilian supremacy is embodied in the U.S. Constitution. The founding fathers were well-versed in history and they were all too aware of abuses on the part of the military. They ordained in Article II, Section II that the President shall be the commander-in-chief of the armed forces."

"In the War of 1812 and in the Mexican War, the President and his cabinet played a big part in the formulation of strategic plans."

"President Woodrow Wilson was adamant about the primacy of the Presidential authority, and Franklin Roosevelt, often disputed as to the judgment he displayed, could never be challenged in terms of his authority. The basic strategic decisions of World War II, like the invasion of Europe in 1944, were made by the civilian leaders of the big three powers."

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"BUT IT IS THE war in Vietnam, the most agonizing and frustrating conflict in U.S. history, that raises the doctrine of Von Clausewitz to the nth power. Professor Bernard Fall, who died recently in Vietnam, was a man who knew his Vietnamese history. He wrote about the "infrastructure"--the parallel hierarchies of the National Liberation Front and the Viet Cong. He described at length the complexity of these social, political and economic structures and warned time and again of the absolute necessity for understanding that only a meaningful alternative to the front could create the conditions for ending the conflict."

"He argued that the bombing of the North was no substitute for such a massive political effort. He pointed out that Ho Chi Minh had prevailed over the French who in 1954 were in possession of Hanoi, Haiphong and every other populated center in the North. Any 'victory' achieved under purely military circumstances, Prof. Fall said, would come at a cost vastly disproportionate to the results."

"The immediate problem for the United States is the development of civilian leadership adequate to what Lincoln called 'the stormy present.'"

FESTIVAL SETTING — Michigan's Cherry Blossom Princess, 19-year-old Cheryl Ann Kingscott of Kalamazoo, inspected some of Washington's world-famous cherry blossoms with Senator Robert P. Griffin during a recent visit to the Capitol. Cheryl, a freshman at Southwestern Community College in Dowagiac, plans on a degree in social work followed by a stint in the Peace Corps.

"THE MONKEES"

"HEADQUARTERS"

"MORE OF THE MONKEES"

"PISCES, AQUARIUS, CAPRICORN & JONES LTD."

"HERB ALPERT & THE TIJUANA BRASS VOL. 2"

"S.R.O."

"LONELY BULL"

"WHIPPED CREAM"

"GOING PLACES"

"SOUTH OF THE BORDER"

"WHAT NOW MY LOVE"

HERB ALPERT'S NINTH

"SOUNDS LIKE"